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ABSTRACT

In 1996, North Carolina began a 5-year evaluation of alternative learning programs (ALPs). This report contains in-depth case studies of four ALPs during the 1996-97 school year. The ALPs were selected to represent different types of programs in the state, and include one middle school, two high school, and one elementary school programs. The case studies were designed to look at issues of student attitudes, behavior, and problem solving. Across the programs, it was found that ALP staff combine caring with high expectations and that they determine program effectiveness by the success of individual students. ALP students do not usually maintain their ties with the schools they have left, and many ALPs are regarded by students as dumping grounds or "junior jails." Many staff members do not have adequate training or support, and the programs lack adequate facilities, materials, and budgets. Based on case study findings, recommendations are made for improvement of staffing and resources for ALPs. Small class size, an individualized and experiential teaching format, and a caring faculty are essential if ALPs are to function effectively. (SLD)

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Alternative Learning Programs Evaluation: Part 3 Report

April 1997

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ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PROGRAMS EVALUATION: PART III REPORT

CASE STUDIES OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS

APRIL 1997

Evaluation Report
Parts II and III
Alternative Learning Programs
1995-96

Executive Summary

Background

Evaluation Reports

The ALP evaluation is in the second of a five-year statewide evaluation process. Part I of the ALP 1995-96 Evaluation Report, presented in December 1996, focused on descriptive information about ALPs. This report, includes Parts II and III and focuses on student outcome data and recommendations about how programs can be improved.

The Part II Report describes selected outcomes for students who participated in ALPs during 1995-96. These outcomes include performance on NC End-of-Grade Tests; performance on Algebra 1, English 1, and Biology End-of-Course Tests; and dropout information.

The Part III Report contains in-depth case studies of four ALPs during the 1996-97 school year: one at the middle school level; two at the high school level; and one elementary program. These ALPs were selected to represent different types of programs in the state. Case studies were conducted to add more depth and human dimensions to the evaluation, to better understand how these programs work, and to identify what is needed for improvement.

Scope of Evaluation

Evaluation Questions

Based on the legislative intent and purposes of the evaluation, six broad evaluation questions are specified:

1. Where are the ALPs located across the state?
2. What are the types of ALPs?
3. Which students are served by these students?
4. How are program funds used?
5. What is the impact of the ALPs?
6. How can ALPs be improved?

The first four evaluation questions were the focus of the Part I Report previously published. The Part II Report of student

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outcomes will address evaluation question 5. The Part III Report of ALP case studies will address all evaluations to a degree, but will focus in particular on evaluation question 6.

Characteristics of Students

Ethnic and Gender Composition

As reported in the Part I Report, demographic data collected during NC End-of-Grade Testing for grades 3 - 8 shows that the overall student population in ALPs does not reflect the ethnic and gender composition of the state. There are fewer White students and more Black students, fewer females and more males in the ALP student population than in the general student population.

At-Risk Indicators

ALP students as a group exhibit more at-risk characteristics than the general student population in the state. Parents of ALP students had less education than parents in the general student population. ALP students were absent more and the dropout rate for ALP students in grades 7 - 12 is about four times higher than in the general student population for the state.

Student Dropout Rates

The trend for ALP dropout rates in grades 9 - 12 is similar to the trend for state dropout rates for those grade levels, only the ALP dropout rates are much higher. For both the state and ALPs, dropout rates decrease with each consecutive grade level from the ninth through the twelfth grades. The highest dropout rate for both the state and ALPs is at the ninth grade level. However, the dropout rate for ALP ninth graders is about five times higher than that of the state. It is not known whether these students dropped out of the ALPs or from their home schools.

Part II Report: Student Outcomes

NC End-of-Course (EOC) Tests

Three high school end-of-course tests were analyzed for this report: Algebra 1, English I, and Biology. Only about ten percent of ALP students were proficient in these three EOC tests compared to about forty to fifty percent of the general student population in the state. However, patterns of proficiency by ethnic/gender groups varied across the three tests. In general more males, Black and White, were proficient on Algebra 1 than females. On the English I and Biology EOC tests, more White students, males and females, were proficient than Black students. Black females outperformed Black males on English I , were comparable to Black males on the Biology EOC test, and fell significantly below the proficiency level of Black males on Algebra I.

NC End-of-Grade (EOG) Tests (grades 3-8)

For both Reading and Mathematics End-of-Grade Tests, ALP students performed well below the overall student population. State proficiency rates were around 70 percent while ALP proficiency rates ranged from 18 to 42 percent, depending on subject and grade. Relative to the general student population, fifth grade ALP students performed better than ALP students in other grade levels on the mathematics EOG test. However, this pattern did not hold for reading scores. In both subject areas, grade 7 had the lowest rate of proficiency for ALP students.

Length of Enrollment in ALP

There was generally more growth in End-of-Grade Test scores for students who had longer contact (32 weeks) with ALP programs than for students who had shorter contact (8 1/2 weeks). Differences were more pronounced in reading than mathematics; and eighth graders showed more growth in reading for longer enrollments, reversing this pattern in mathematics. While the length of the enrollment in an ALP was not controlled for purposes of this evaluation, and these results do not establish a causal relationship, these results provide some evidence that exposure to the ALPs has a positive result for ALP students.

Summary

ALP students have significant educational deficiencies that put them at risk of failure. While the ALPs might be helping students improve their academic performance, they are also dealing with significant behavioral problems that take time away from academic instruction. These data also suggest intervention early is likely to be most successful. Otherwise, ALP students start out behind and never catch up.

Part III Report: Case Studies

Purpose

State level test data look at the impact of ALPs on students' success at the broadest level. This data does not address student attitudes, improved behavior, better problem-solving, or more commitment to school. The case studies were designed to look at these issues, as well as to obtain a more in-depth description about types of programs, student needs, and areas of needed improvement.

Common Findings Across Case Study Sites

- ALP staff combine caring with high expectations and determine program effectiveness by the success of individual students.
- Most regular schools do not maintain connections with students or a sense of responsibility for them once they enroll in ALPs, and many students consider regular schools an aversive setting.

- Many ALPs are viewed as "dumping grounds" or "junior jails."
- Many staff have little formal training and ongoing support to work with ALP students.
- Facilities, materials, and budgets are inadequate.
- Different enrollment trends necessitate flexibility in shifting resources.

Summary Recommendations

Upon review of the results of the Part II Student Outcomes Study and the Part III Case Studies of ALPs, following is a summary of the recommendations for improvement:

- Hire competent, caring staff who can balance structure, high expectations, and flexibility for these students. Staff need to be supported with improved, ongoing staff development.
- Create better connections between ALPs and home schools, especially better transitions in and out of ALPs. It is especially difficult for students to transition from small ALPs back into large regular schools and still maintain their progress without strong support. Some students would benefit from a change of schools after exiting the ALP so as not to slip back into old habits and patterns with peer groups that are not constructive. Currently, some local school board policies make these needed school transfers difficult or impossible.
- Regular schools need to adapt in order to better meet the needs of all students. What is needed is more "hands on," experiential teaching methods, more caring, and more involvement in problem solving that may go beyond the regular bounds of school. Bringing together more community, health, and human services for out-of-school problems that are barriers to school success is also needed.
- Establish systems for tracking and evaluating student progress. Even longitudinal tracking of simple outcomes for ALP students would be informative, such as grades, achievement scores, graduation rates, and disciplinary actions.
- Improve facilities, resources, and curriculum. Funding decisions in these areas are made by local districts and not the state. ALPs are frequently assigned to "left-over" facilities and must scrounge for funds to buy updated equipment, materials, and supplies. These problems contribute to the image problems of ALPs and also contribute to the unintended message that alternative schools are not important and that the students there are not valued. Perhaps some contribution of resources from regular schools prorated by the number of students and length of stay in ALPs would help improve program quality and shared accountability for ALP students.
- Find ways to fund ALPs that address shifts in peak enrollment periods. ALPs need to maintain their small class size in order to fulfill their purpose of individualized and personalized education. Otherwise, they risk becoming holding tanks for students.

- ALP students need something different and although there is no one best way, three characteristics are important to effectiveness: small class size, an individualized and experiential teaching format, and a caring faculty with high expectations for student success.
- Most ALP students , for a variety of reasons, have serious odds against their doing well in school. For the most part, they start out behind academically and never catch up. What is needed is more focus on prevention and early intervention as well as bringing together support services (school-linked or school-based) for out-of-school problems that have an impact on students' learning.
- Length of enrollment in an ALP is an important factor, but so is the quality of the educational experience while the student is enrolled. Many ALPs are struggling for enough resources to do a barely adequate job with these students. In addition to adequate funding, regular schools must find ways to share resources, responsibility, and accountability for these students.

Acknowledgments

These case studies were carried out by the Evaluation Services Section, Division of Accountability Services; Dr. George Noblit, UNC-Chapel Hill and three of his graduate students; and Dr. David Langmeyer, contract evaluator for the Alternative Learning Evaluation Project. The three graduate students each joined a member of the Evaluation Services Section staff and Dr. Langmeyer to conduct the four site visits. The graduate students are Amy Bauman, Paula Groves, and Joseph Rayle. The students and Dr. Noblit wrote the first drafts of the report. Dr. Carolyn Cobb and Dee Brewer, with assistance of Dr. David Langmeyer, revised and finalized the report of case studies.

Introduction to Case Studies of Alternative Schools

Background

As part of the Alternative Learning Program Evaluation Design, four case studies were conducted. The goal of these studies is to understand the educational nature, varied social services, policies, and preliminary evidence of effectiveness. This report includes the research methodology, the four case studies, and a cross site synthesis of the results of the four cases.

Alternative learning programs have become a common response of schools and school districts to the increasing rate of students at risk (Casey Foundation, 1995). As such, the programs are commonly seen as "second chances" for students who are behind academically, have dropped out of school (or are considered likely to drop out), or have been suspended or expelled from regular school programs. Raywid (1994: 27) observes that "two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally serviced by the regular program, and consequently they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs, and environments." Conventional educational programs have not worked for these students and now different programs are needed. Educators in North Carolina have been experimenting with a range of alternative programs, trying to discern which program meets the needs of their particular at-risk students.

Research Procedures

The Alternative Learning Program Evaluation incorporates a three-pronged approach. The first two parts are broader studies conveying descriptive characteristics and outcomes of the programs statewide. The third phase of the evaluation studies four "representative" programs. Case study research involves using a mix of data collection techniques to get a description of programs as they are enacted (Yin, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). The focus is on a limited set of issues within a specific time frame. Consequently, the alternative learning programs case studies focused on the nature of the programs, policies, and evidence of effectiveness and improvements that may be needed. The sites selected reflect a variety of programs that exist across the state (e.g., added services, extended day school, flexible/individualized, and behavior management approaches to learning), grade level services (elementary, middle, and high) and regions of North Carolina (Mountains, Piedmont, Coastal Plains).

Access to the programs was obtained by the NC Department of Public Instruction. Each program was visited by a team of researchers. Each program welcomed the evaluators, and staff were eager to share information about their alternative school. A total of 14 personal days were spent on site.

Researchers interviewed staff, students, parents and other community representatives, observed the programs in action, and collected and analyzed relevant program documents. Field notes were taken, coded, and analyzed to produce the case studies that follow. Each of the programs and relevant identifying materials have been given pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity of the alternative programs, staff, and students.

Once the case studies were written, the cases were compared for similarities and differences and these results were synthesized. This synthesis addresses the key issues of the case studies.

The Case Studies

The Brookstone Alternative School

Anita is a seventh grader at the Brookstone School. About 5'3" and dressed in blue jeans and an oversized wool shirt, she is open and receptive. She is typical of the students at Brookstone because she has committed at least one "class three" infraction at her home school. She candidly describes the event in which she "lost her temper."

> *Another student hit me. And we started fighting'. And when two teachers got involved... three teachers try to break it up they got into it.*

This is her first time at Brookstone and she has been there for almost eight weeks (including the holiday break.) "I can't leave here until the end of this month," she says. But her record and her attitude seem to indicate that there is no reason why this should not happen.

Like many children at Jackson, Anita expresses a desire to return to her home school environment, primarily because "this school is isolated ... I didn't want to come here." She complains about the lack of social diversity. But she is also clear that her time here has been productive.

> *I think it helped me a lot. Not being around so many people I didn't have no pressures. Not a lot of peer pressure. I was just me. I didn't have to impress nobody. I just worked. And that helped me with my temper. Now if I went back to my other school and I got into a conflict with somebody, the first thing I would do is walk away or tell the principal or something.*

Anita's primary difference from the majority of the students at Brookstone lies in her academic status. She has spent the past two months honing her behavior and interpersonal skills rather than struggling academically. (Although she openly acknowledges that "when you need help there's so many teachers you can just go up and ask for help and they'll help you.) As she prepares to leave and

return to her home school, she is nostalgic about the friends she has made recently, but also seems quite confident that the areas of her behavior which contributed to the initial suspension are now under her control. In many ways, if Anita does not return to the Brookstone School for the next year and a half, she qualifies as one of their success stories.

Background

The Brookstone School is a five year old Alternative Public School that serves sixth, seventh, and eighth graders from across the large county who can no longer function successfully in a traditional classroom, due primarily to behavioral problems. The program also serves most categories of exceptional students. The school is divided into three buildings which are between one and three miles from each other. Each site houses one grade level, the eighth grade site being the largest. Of the population of students who attend Jackson, about 75 percent are male; about 80 percent are black. The remainder are generally European American. They enroll a few Latino and even fewer Asian American students.

According to the principal, the school is run by an administrative team including a principal and three lead teachers. The three lead teachers run the three grade-level buildings like an assistant principal and serve as the authority in that building. Further, there is a school-based team with representatives from each department (teachers, administrators, support services, special education) that meets at least once a month. Teachers make recommendations to the school based team, which in turn makes recommendations to the administrative team, including decisions regarding fiscal expenditures.

School Mission

The mission of the Brookstone School, as explained by its principal, is, "to provide a continuation of education for kids who get put out of school. We are not designed as a long term treatment facility. Our goal is to modify behavior and return each student to the home school. Kids don't come here because of academics. They're here because of some behavioral problem." Students are sent to Brookstone after a formal hearing in their home school which addresses one or more "major" infractions. Although there is an intake process once the student arrives, Brookstone must accept them. The intake is primarily to clarify the rules and expectations that the school has for the student.

One of the central questions related to the school's mission, and that of many alternative schools is, "Who owns the students?" That is, who is ultimately responsible for decisions related to each student's school success? The school was originally designed with what looks like a "one way

street" type of student referral system. The student's home school makes decisions about which students will be placed at Brookstone. They also decide when the student may return to the home school, even though, by Brookstone's standards and the student's own understanding, the student has "earned" the opportunity to return to the home school. Further, the minimum length of time the student must stay at Brookstone is not known to the student or the Brookstone staff from the outset. Because of this, teachers say that some students lose hope and give up. All the control for these decisions resides with the home school principals. Brookstone's principal and the new Superintendent for the school district want to change all that. They support a philosophy in which the home school "owns (is responsible for) the students."

Types of Student Served

Many of the students who go to Brookstone have been suspended for carrying weapons, getting into fights, attacking authority figures, or for having some connection with drugs. Essentially, this is the last place a student can go before a permanent expulsion. Although the principal acknowledges that academics is not the primary reason for referral for students enrolled at Brookstone, it is important to note that few of the students who spend time at Brookstone are working at grade level. Many students do remedial and catch-up work while they are in the program. Clearly, although academics may not have brought these students to this crisis point, it has exacerbated destructive behavior cycles.

Most students stay at Brookstone for six to eight weeks, during which time their school lives are rigorously structured. Their behavior is monitored and assessed daily. Infractions of any rules yield immediate consequences, ranging from a poor daily assessment (on daily behavior point sheets) to suspension. The students quickly learn what is expected of them and what will happen if they challenge those expectations. The small class size (ideally no more than ten) facilitates both individual attention around emotional and academic needs and the behavioral monitoring necessary for any significant changes. A student leaves Brookstone when there is agreement between this school and the home school that he/she has met the behavioral requirements and is likely to succeed back in a traditional public school setting. However, the home school maintains the ultimate decision-making authority regarding a student's re-enrollment there.

Program

Student Enrollment Versus Capacity. The school served 520 students last year and 600 students the year before. The highest enrollment is at the eighth grade level, which has about three times the enrollment of the other two grades. The school is designed to serve a maximum of 150 students

at any one time in order to maintain a 1:10 student-to-teacher ratio. However, at peak periods (January and February and from late March until the end of the school year) of enrollment, class size, and therefore school size, are much higher. It is not uncommon for the student enrollment to reach 210-220 students at one time.

Schedule for Time and Academic Content. Teachers work from 7:30 am to 3:00 pm. There are no ball games, PTA, or after school activities. The school day for students at Brookstone goes from 8:30 am - 2:30 pm. Since there are only two buses which cover the entire county, for many students, their day includes a two to three hour bus ride on either end. Once physically at school, the students have no unstructured, unsupervised time. There are no bells or intercoms in the buildings. Teachers develop their own schedules. They are not required to have 45 minutes of math, for example.

Students begin the day with their homeroom teacher (either in a self-contained or team-taught classroom) doing either computer work or quiet reading. The students then go, on a staggered schedule, to the make-shift cafeteria, for breakfast. The rest of the morning is spent on traditional academic subjects--Math, Social Studies, Language Arts, and Science--with specific amounts of time determined by individual teachers. The students have twenty minutes for lunch, during which time they sit quietly at their tables with their teachers.

The afternoon is devoted to classes on Social Skills (taught by the Behavioral Management Technician) and computer work. Gym is staggered throughout the day, depending on the individual group. The students get two group bathroom breaks -- one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Very few students are allowed to ever walk in the hall unattended by the adult and their group. Those who do are often in the process of "transitioning out" of Jackson, and have earned more privileges than those who have just arrived. With very few exceptions, every day is structured exactly the same.

Classroom Structure and Methodology. Although the Brookstone School identifies itself as an alternative learning program whose focus is behavior management and modification, it functions on a daily basis as a traditionally structured school. All the classrooms share certain similarities. Each is set up with ten to fifteen desk-chair units facing either the center of the room or the chalkboard. These desks do not touch each other in order to minimize the temptation of any physical contact between students. Every room has a set of explicit rules posted in a prominent position, and a minimal number of posters on the wall. Finally, unlike "typical" classrooms, in the 8th grade building, each room has a wall that is built to create a small hallway-like space close to the door. This wall covers a set of coat hooks for storage of the few personal belongings the students bring to school. It is also where a student is sent for any in-class "isolation" when a student is having difficulty moderating his/her behavior. Anyone who sits there can still hear the content of a lesson, but is no longer visible; nor can they see the other members of the group.

The curriculum is coordinated through the Lead Teachers, using the Jostens learning package. That software is what teachers use to build their prescriptive packets for instruction. The NC Standard Course of Study is used at the appropriate grade levels. Teachers also use the Accelerated Reading program with students. The pedagogy across the classrooms, while it varies somewhat by individual teacher, is structurally similar. Most lessons are teacher-driven, teacher-directed, and then assessed through worksheets and quizzes. There is little or no independent group work, and only rarely (with direct permission) does a student get out of his/her seat or speak to another person in the room.

The transient nature of the student population combined with their varied academic range means that particular assignments are often individualized. When each student arrives at Jackson, part of the initial intake process is an assessment of reading and math levels using the Jostens Learning Curriculum, an extensive math and language arts computer program that correlates with North Carolina's performance standards, covering grade levels K-8. Once assessed, each student works according to the grade level at which he/she falls.

Each level of the Jostens program includes a series of problem solving activities and end of unit tests. The students are given at least one period a day to work on the computer for either math or reading. The teacher-led lessons supplement the work the students are doing on Jostens. Given the heavy reliance on this program, Brookstone has set up an elaborate computer system, including two computers per classroom and an additional computer lab, containing ten computers (MacIntosh IIsi).

The principal reports that one of his key strategies is to "hand pick" teachers who are flexible, who have a willingness to work with this kind of student, and who are open to a more prescriptive type of teaching, not lecture. The principal stated, "These students are right brained and visual so I look for teachers who are technology oriented." The school places a strong emphasis on technology. The principal also emphasizes that students at Brookstone are expressive and need more academic activities incorporating creative arts, such as writing, music, drama, and dance. The former district superintendent did not favor this approach in an alternative learning program.

Social Skills and Behavior Management. The students at Brookstone have Social Skills classes twice a week. They are taught by the Behavioral Management Technician (BMT) and the School Counselor. As one BMT describes these classes, "We teach social skills throughout the week and counsel the students in socially appropriate behavior. We deal strictly with right and wrong and how to assess a situation and do what is right, not what is wrong....I try and make everything relevant."

The role of the BMT, particularly as it applies to discipline, is central to Brookstone's daily functioning. Each building has its own BMT who monitors classes to assist teachers, oversees many lunch periods, and counsels parents in addition to teaching the social skills classes. Further, when a

student exhibits some kind of behavioral crisis, either in or out of class, it is the BMT who is called in to facilitate a resolution, both with the individual student and with the class.

The school staff is determined to create both a broad inclusive umbrella of cause-effect structure for behavior (both good and bad) while still creating individual behavioral goals for each student. As the BMT at the 8th grade site explains,

> *We show a lot of love and standards here. Without one the other won't work...If you fight, you are suspended. If you respond to the provocation, you are suspended. Now I might only suspend you for three days if you responded, when I would suspend you for a week if you initiated the encounter...Suspensions, for some, are part of the process of hitting bottom. How students view suspensions varies. We use consequences that will best suit the student, given that the whole class is OK.*

Although suspension is always an option, the goal is to help the student develop a series of coping skills that will help him/her avoid getting into similar crisis situations in the future.

The student's behavior is assessed on a daily basis. There are a series of levels that the students must work through to complete the program and transition back into the home school. Each level is represented by a different colored daily assessment (point) sheet. It takes about five days, depending on the student, to move from one level to the next. When a student first enters Brookstone his/her behavior is monitored every three minutes. The student starts the day with 120 points. Any infraction of the rules (from talking out of turn to hitting another student) means a loss of points. Every day, the students take the behavior sheets home, with teacher comments added in. The students can get points added back if they return the sheet signed by a parent or guardian. As the students move through the levels, they increase their freedom of movement and decrease the number of times they are assessed. By the end, their behavior is monitored once every half- hour, and they can walk down the halls to the bathroom unaccompanied. The students clearly understand the ramifications of moving from one level to the next, or remaining at a low level for an extended period of time.

By the time a student has gotten to the third or fourth level, barring some kind of crisis, the school and the family begin to address a return to the home school. This is often the first contact that the two institutions have had with one another since the student's initial arrival. Until this point he/she has been barred from returning to the home school, upon penalty of a felony indictment of trespassing. The reciprocity between the home school and Brookstone varies depending on both the individual home school and the relationship the school had with the student before he/she left. Often, the home school makes the transition back very difficult -- either by prolonging the student's stay at Brookstone by an overt refusal to allow the student to return, or by not directly monitoring and supporting the student once he/she is back in the home school setting.

With the exception of the BMT and the school counselors, the teachers at Brookstone have no special training in behavior management with students. The principal describes his faculty as "flexible and hand picked." Although most experienced teachers have taught in traditional classrooms, they are willing " to change from previous methods to prescriptive methods." In Jackson's case, "prescriptive" translates into highly individualized and not completely content oriented. Teachers deal with whatever obstacles are in the way of learning, including providing good doses of encouragement and motivation where needed. There are also a number of new teachers who are hired primarily for their "enthusiasm and determination." The principal continually compliments and supports his faculty saying, "The vision [of the school] has really come from the teachers of the school, with only some parameters set by the superintendent." In the five year history of the school, it is primarily the faculty who have molded and determined the direction in which the institution has evolved. In speaking with them, it is clear they all have a great deal invested and at stake in the continued success of the school.

Parental Involvement Through Outreach. Brookstone School considers parent involvement an important part of their work with students. Many students at the school reportedly come from chaotic homes and neighborhoods, some from group homes, and few are from traditional two parent families. Each grade level has a counselor and a behavior management specialist who contact parents/guardians every day regarding student attendance. Once a quarter, staff bring food and parents are invited. Once a month the principal provides a breakfast and invites parents. At the end of the year the school sponsors a big banquet for those students in attendance at that time, usually about 200.

School Staffing. Staffing for this school includes the following:

- 1 principal (housed in the 8th grade building)
- 3 lead teachers (one per building)
- 15 teachers total:

  4 teachers (grades 6/7 building)

  3 teachers plus 1 Exceptional Education teacher (grade 7 building)

  6 teachers plus 1 Exceptional Education teacher (grade 8 building)
- 3 guidance counselors (one per building)
- 2 teacher assistants
- 1 part-time psychologist (3 days per week total)
- 1 part-time nurse (1/2 day per week total)

- 3 Behavior Management Technicians (one per building)
- 1 School Resource Officer (paid for by the city)

Relationship to Regular School

Challenges for both Brookstone and the individual student surrounding the transition back to the home school are numerous and complex. In general the students are usually anxious to go back, but often that old environment is a breeding ground for further infractions or crises, due to both social temptations and "targeting" of the student. Brookstone remains determined to support the students. They try and prepare them by getting them to see the problems the way the system saw them...regardless of whether the student thinks the system was right or wrong. By the time the students are ready to transition back to their home schools, their perspectives on their experiences at Brookstone reflect a clear understanding of how the relationship between themselves and the system has not worked and what they can do to make it work better. Teachers also emphasize that students are now labeled and will be suspected of wrongdoing. The staff at Brookstone do not attempt to romanticize this process. They are well aware that although the home school may not want the student back in their school, the district has established Brookstone as a transitional program-- not one where students can stay long term. Finally, each of Jackson's sites has an individual who oversees the initial parts of each student's transition back to his/her home school.

Usually, the goal of students at Brookstone is to leave. They complain bitterly about the lack of freedom (e.g., no purses or book bags, no talking, getting out of seat or going to restroom without permission), lack of amenities (e.g., bad food, horrible bus rides, cannot use phone) and the size of the classes (limitations on socializing). They also, however, acknowledge that the class size means they get individual attention and feel physically safe while in the building. For some, this is a totally new experience. The academic program, they insist, is not challenging. They recognize that there does not seem to be a strong emphasis on content, and there is a heavy reliance on rote learning. They do like the fact that there is no homework assigned at Brookstone. Finally, they are realistic about their return to their home schools. Some are determined to "do better," while others seem more resigned to the idea that "if your friends do it, you're probably going to do it too." With very few exceptions, students are cynical or angry about the authority figures in the home school. The overriding tone is one of feeling uncared for and abandoned by their old school.

School Budget

The annual budget for the school is approximately $1,580,000. Of the total school budget, $776,000 (49%) comes from state teacher allotment funds. The remainder of the budget comes from local, federal , and grant funds. This amount does not reflect the cost of leasing two of the three school buildings. The third building is owned by the school district. Although students enroll in Brookstone for varying lengths of time, the average cost per student (based on total number served last year) is about $2870. The ADM funds for students who enroll at Brookstone after the first two months of school do not follow the students when they change enrollment to an ALP. They remain with the students home schools.

Evidence of Success

Student Outcomes. Each year the school district sets expected achievement goals for each school (referred to in this report as benchmark goals). Brookstone School has met its benchmark goals for the last three years.

Annual Survey of Parent, Student, Teacher Opinions. Additionally, the district annually administers surveys to parents, teachers, and students from each school. Brookstone receives favorable marks each time the survey is administered. The kinds of specific feedback they have received include that they care about students who attend their school; they have a lot of technology; they are viewed as fair, disciplined, and structured; and that students do not fight at Brookstone. In some cases it seems that students may learn to feel "too safe" at Brookstone to go back and know how to handle themselves in middle schools with a thousand or more students. Other feedback indicates that more support services from a variety of areas need to be made accessible to students at Brookstone.

Teacher Perceptions. The teachers, in general, consider the program at Brookstone to have been honed and refined over the past five years. They focus, almost exclusively, on individual accomplishments rather than on class growth or large scale curriculum design. They describe the work they do as relying heavily on patience and the ability to see goodness in a student when no one else has been able to. They struggle with the outside reputation that the school has within the larger educational community. Virtually every teacher and administrator commented on how Brookstone is seen as "a dumping ground" and they, in-turn, are associated with doing only the most remedial work. "The regular schools want us to fix the kids and they have more resources than we do. It's a mind thing. You have to care," comments one teacher. "We don't fix kids here," another teacher comments. "We modify behavior and give kids strategies."

Issues of wanting to be publicly validated plague the faculty, just as issues of self-esteem plague the students. The teachers describe a desire to have the facilities and benefits that a "regular school" has, such as art, dance, music, and drama. Their sensitivity to these issues, seems to reflect an understanding of the students' needs as well. They also emphasize that reduced class size is essential. Their best work is done with no more than ten students in a class. But the "dumping ground" or a "junior jail" image which they complain about seems, in their opinions, to correspond to an increasing flow of students, "particularly in April, when all schools are trying to hit their benchmark goals for district accountability" (which include financial incentives).

In spite of all the external and systemic problems, the faculty sees the program as successful. Their idea of a success story is a student who is able to survive well, either by returning to their home school and moving on to high school, or eventually getting a GED and a solid job. All the stories they tell have to do with students who, with Brookstone's help and the student's hard work, are able to create a safe environment for themselves, outside the walls of the school. It is "a kid who reaches the point of breaking ...someone who takes responsibility for his actions and knows when to ask for help." As one woman, who has been at the school since its inception said, "I keep saying this is my last year...But each year I think I could save two more kids. You find yourself getting involved because we wanted to make a difference."

When Students Leave and Do Not Return. The staff avoids using any language of failure. For a student to be less successful translates into multiple returns to Brookstone from the home school. "I had one student who returned twice (in one year)," explains a teacher. "Then we had to re-group and figure out what happened and help the student help himself while still in the program." There is a striking unwillingness to give up on a child. One parent describes her feelings about the program, given that her child has been in it for two months. " They are able to focus not only for bad things, but they focus on his good qualities too. They don't threaten him...If he's off task, they have the patience to tell him no. Here the smaller groups, they have time to see it. He sees it has helped him." At some level the program gets evaluated each time a student leaves and does or does not return. But there seems to be a tacit understanding that measuring the impact of the program is a difficult process to generalize beyond that one standard.

Resources and Improvements Needed

Principal and teachers mentioned the following variety of resources needed to maximize the school's effectiveness.

- Continue to provide staff development including conflict resolution, peer mediation, and prescriptive teaching strategies.

- Human resource support including support services from a variety of areas (e.g., mental health, health, social work) and active recruiting of teachers.
- Transportation issues (long bus rides) need answers and support from the district.
- Cafeteria--the school needs its own kitchen.
- Transitions of students to and from the Brookstone School and the home school do not work as well as they need to. What is needed is a more accurate description of what transition should include and what the various roles are. The entire transition process needs to be modified to be successful.
- The district needs to honor the established student enrollment capacity in order to maintain the 1:10 student-teacher ratio.

Lessons to be Learned

Brookstone's limitations lie in two main realms: (1) curriculum and instructional methodology and (2) the school's broader relationship to the school district.

(1) Broader curriculum and instructional strategies. There are complaints about the lack of creative and fine arts (art, music, dance, and drama), alternative methods of learning and self-expression beyond traditional academic realms. Fine arts are often areas where students who are struggling in school can thrive. Also, many of these students are from low income homes and will not have many opportunities for any artistic pursuit on their own.

Heavy reliance on prescriptive teaching, worksheets, and programmed assessments, while useful in maintaining control and order in the classroom, without appropriate balance with other methodologies, may be sacrificing other important aspects of the learning process, such as reasoning, critical, and creative thinking; group problem solving; speaking, listening, and oral presentation skills. Additionally, the school needs a broader range of physical education activities than just basketball. These students are in a very structured program during the day and need a variety of physical activities to constructively expend some of their energies. Students in alternative programs most often benefit from social skills interventions and ways to teach them self care and conflict resolution. Alternative programs often benefit from differential staffing (mental health and health professionals especially).

(2) Alternative schools are not "dumping grounds" or "junior jails." The perception of the alternative schools as "dumping grounds" or a "junior jails" limits the way the school can approach its individual students. Other schools in the school district need to have an improved

understanding of the kinds of things that alternative programs are designed to do. Misconceptions make it more difficult for the alternative program to negotiate with the home school's claim on any individual student, even if that student (who was failing in a traditional setting) is finally seeing both academic and personal success in the alternative program. As one teacher said, "We just need to keep some kids for the entire year. When students go back, many get targeted, when what they really need is a lot of forgiveness. Some students need a program like this year round, with individual attention, a small school, and small classes." While teachers admit that, "some students have left alternative programs and have come back that never should have left -- still to label all students from an alternative program is not right."

Another teacher added, "All teachers need to do time in a school like this. Some of these students have been written off for life. The home school staff never forget. They won't let them back in school." This brings up the other side of the same issue which is that some students are ready to return to the home school and are not allowed to return until the following school year. Further, some students in an alternative setting verbalize a desire not to return to the home school, but rather to enroll in an entirely different school, where they could truly have a "fresh start" with their newly acquired skills in behavior management. However, at least for the Brookstone School, transfers of students through the central administration are reportedly very difficult to achieve.

(3) Who Owns the Student? Transitions Are Important. Addressing the policy question of who is responsible for each student's school success is central to many of the issues that seem to undermine continuous progress for students and for an alternative school. Following are some specific issues that have been mentioned as possible solutions:

- Specifying up front the minimum length of stay for the student and what the student must achieve in order to earn his or her way back to the home school, and then honoring that agreement between the home school and the alternative school, would provide the basis for a good start.
- Specifying some responsibilities for the home school while its students are enrolled in the alternative school, such as regular visits, observing, and conferencing in the process communicates to the students that they are valued, that they have not been abandoned, and that they do have a place where they belong in the home school.
- Providing specific, individualized services through a Transition Counselor, both when the student enrolls in an alternative school and when the student re-enrolls in home school helps students work through personal adjustment issues as they make these significant changes moving back and forth, both academically and socially.

(4) Regulate the Maximum Student Capacity to Maintain Small Class Size. There should be a cap on the number of students enrolled in an alternative learning program at any one time. The school cannot be successful with students with multiple, complex needs when class sizes go above ten. Since alternative programs are designed to be small, the school district should regulate its placements or these programs will become holding tanks for all the students there.

(5) Make "Outside of School" Problems Part of Intervention. Home schools and alternative schools must make the "out of school" problems part of the intervention if schools are to effectively educate these students and assist them in learning to live their lives more constructively. These young people most often have tremendous obstacles and problems at home and in their neighborhoods.

(6) Staff in Alternative Settings Need Support and Rejuvenation. Staff in alternative settings are generally very caring and are working in a high burnout job. In addition to specialized staff development during the summer with pay, adding more and different support staff and incentive or "combat pay" have been suggested. Rotation every few years into a highly desirable, high status position where they would spend the year learning all the latest techniques for working with high risk populations is another approach along with designing mentoring programs for teachers.

(7) Staff's Resiliency: Unwillingness to View Students as "Problems." The essential strength of the Brookstone School and many alternative schools seems to lie in the entire staff's unwillingness to see these students as "problems." As one teacher put it, "Failure stories we take to heart." They see the students as young people whose lives have kept them from learning some basic social skills that most assimilate at a very young age. "Students here have a lot to deal with," one teacher comments. "Some of the things these students have done that got them placed here are part of being a kid--They make mistakes." Their goal is always increasing self-esteem while improving behavioral self-control. Yet the Brookstone School's "success" with the students depends heavily on the unity of the staff and the focus on the student rather than solely on increased structure. So many aspects of the Brookstone School work effectively because of the individuals implementing them and could very easily be abused in another setting with a different staff.

When one walks into Brookstone, the calm orderliness is striking. Students walk through the halls in single file, barely speaking. Classrooms are focused centers of learning, and everyone seems very clear as to what their role and function is. There is also an obvious sense of care and belief in the students there. One does not get the sense that these are students who historically frightened both adults and other students in another setting. They are not "menacing" in this environment, nor are they anomalies. Thus, one responds to them as one might a typical student, who did not have the record

most of these students have. Through a commitment to reciprocal respect between the students and the staff, one has the feeling that parts of the cycles of destruction can be broken.

MOUNTAINVIEW ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM

The school day begins at Mountainview Alternative School program around 8:30 am. Most students sit on the couches that line two walls of the program's small main meeting room. Some students, mostly the ones who have been in the program for a time, talk excitedly to each other. The newcomers sit quietly together on one couch. A few seem a bit agitated. One, who has just come from an in-patient psychiatric facility, stares silently. The two counselors sit in chairs in the circle.

The group begins the day with a "check in" process where each student discusses personal feelings and goals for that day. The two counselors facilitate the discussion, modeling conflict resolution, and communication skills. The group breaks up, each student moving to get math worksheets, reading or art materials, or to work with programmed instruction on one of the center's computers. The counselors help individual students with questions about their assignments; help resolve any conflicts between students; and talk to students one-on-one about emotional, family, economic, or academic problems the students are experiencing. On other days, as often as twice a week, the group plans and goes out on a field trip or other sorts of experiential learning.

Background

The Mountainview Alternative School program began last year in response to an earlier, but unsuccessful, alternative school. The earlier ALP was seen as a "holding pen" or "dumping ground" for troublesome and unsuccessful students. The LEA decided to write a grant for state ALP funds in hopes of starting a new and different alternative program. LEA staff convened a grant-writing committee composed of school staff and of community agency representatives (e.g., Department of Mental Health, Department of Social Services, the Court System, and representatives from the Willie M. School) in Jefferson County. The successful interagency working relationships in Jefferson County are extremely positive. The close working relationships among the agencies continues to be a unique strength of this county and contributes to the overall success of this program as well as the integrated services at the elementary grade levels.

Philosophy

The interagency grant-writing team developed their proposal based on the questions: "What was special to us in high school," "What is true learning," and " What are your dreams for these students?" Team members cited things such as teachers who loved them, science experiments, field trips, cheer leading, and meaningful curriculum units. Thus, the program developed was experiential and "hands-on." The team realized that success in social skills was as important as academic success for these students. In hiring staff members, the school looked for teachers who could answer these powerful questions in new and flexible ways. Most important, anyone involved needed to "love these students."

Mountainview's program was designed around the philosophy of experiential learning, accompanied by individualized and self-paced learning. It focuses on maintaining high expectations within the individualized academic environment. Teams of psychologists, teachers, counselors and court officials innovatively work together to meet a broad range of needs. There is no "cookie cutter" approach. The emphasis is on both academic as well as social accountability, while providing support so the students can attain the necessary credits to graduate. Since behavior and academic accomplishments often weigh equally heavily, the school has clear expectations and approaches for both. The marriage of experiential learning and commitment to individual children has become the foundation of Mountainview ALP.

Types of Students Served

This program serves students in grades 9-12. According to the program director, 75 percent of the students are from extremely poor backgrounds and several have no residing parent. Students currently enrolled evidence a range of problems, but almost all combine behavioral and academic challenges. One student has come from the self-contained Willie M. School. Another was previously in a psychiatric treatment center. Four students are living on their own without a residing parent. Only two students out of the current 16 enrollees live in two-parent homes. Several have poor housing, including no heat in one or two cases. Drug use/abuse was prevalent for several students. Others had earned almost no credits toward graduation; one girl had been in school for three years and earned one credit before entering the program.

Admission to the program is by referral, and by implication not for everyone. The principal and assistant principal of the regular high school choose students they feel could benefit from the program, although referrals can be made by other people as well. The assistant principal said, in describing this process, that he looks for "discipline problems in class, trouble working with others, not completing homework, or disruptive behavior." The principal sighted academic problems as another indicator.

However, he also indicated that he does not refer the few students he considers so "hard core" that they will not benefit from the program. He did not operationally define "hard core." After the referral is made, the students must apply for the program, writing a short essay about why they want to be accepted. The student and her/his parent(s) then visit the school. The newly admitted student signs an individual contract specifying commitments about both personal behavior and academic work.

Students may return to the high school after one semester. But if that transition does not go well, the student may return to Mountainview. Scholarships to post-secondary education are promised by a third-party to all who graduate.

Program

Setting. After one year of operation without a physical facility, the school's current building reflects its low budget and flexibility. The "classroom" is a two-room renovated commercial lease atop a garage. The classroom apparently originated as a large one bedroom apartment. The entry door opens onto a large kitchen that includes a couch, two tables, and some computers against one wall. To the left of the kitchen is a meeting room with three couches, small tables and chairs, a television and stereo equipment. In keeping with the unconventional nature of the program, the rooms are set up so that a variety of simultaneous activities are possible. The tables in the room with the computers as well as the kitchen are all used for schoolwork, reading, eating, and group work. The computers themselves are the only clearly specialized areas. Some instruction is via computer programs, and the site has recently gotten an Internet connection.

Academic Approach. The school approaches the curriculum in a variety of ways. Students may be taking different courses at any one time. They are given copies of the goals and objectives for the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCS) for any course they take. They keep it, along with their work for that course, in a portfolio. As students work through the NCSCS for a course, they check off each objective and goal as it is mastered. A highly individualized environment, there are few formal classes or lectures. It is up to the students, with adult tutoring and support, to prepare themselves and pass their state end-of-course tests. In addition to certified part-time teachers who come in to provide individual guidance, grade work and answer questions, tutors are available to provide help in special areas. Teaching Fellows from the local university are another tutorial source. Mastery may be demonstrated in multiple ways, including writing stories, poems, essays; creating artwork; and taking pictures.

Field trips are a core activity of this program, and they are planned by the whole class. Students have been to Washington, DC, Gettysburg, Raleigh, the Asheboro Zoo, the Knoxville Aquarium as well as sites of local adventures. The field trips accomplish two major tasks: (1) they

provide experiential learning opportunities that reinforce what they are learning, and (2) the very acts of planning and traveling together focuses attention on interpersonal and social skills. As an example of linking the field trips with the curriculum, students went on two field trips that tracked the life cycle respectively for trees and for human beings. They first visited the Joyce Kilmer National Forest, followed by a paper factory and a recycling operation. For the study of the human life cycle, they visited a birthing center, followed by a retirement home and a cemetery. As one student who had returned to regular high school said, " You got to have hands on experience...learning how things really work; not just read about it in a text book. There was a lot of group work."

On days that do not include a field trip, the students work in the classroom on academics, study skills, communication skills, or interpersonal skills. Every day begins and ends with group meetings, in which issues are dealt with, and the days activities are planned. The only venture out of the classroom is to the high school for lunch.

Social Skills/Behavior. Although the academic environment is not structured in a traditional manner, there are clear rules for expected behavior. Absences are limited to no more than five days per semester. Fighting is not tolerated. The directors noted that the most burdensome issue is dealing with inappropriate social skills, with what they describe as "perception disabilities" among the students. A major goal of the program is to teach "problem solving" that does not lead to further problems. The whole group meets to decide how to deal with transgressions. "In some situations the group is better at addressing the problem. Some students are very adept at working things out and confronting each other." However, the directors have veto power. As a rule, anyone who does something wrong must rectify the problem.

The principal at the regular high school related this story: "During the first year, one of the (ALP) students stole a CD player out of a car here. The program staff, knowing who did it, had a meeting with the students about the incident. Although the ALP paid for the stolen CD out of the program budget, students decided that the offending student had to pay back the program for the amount of the CD (around $600). Normally in high school, the comment is, "Who cares? My kids don't do that." The program staff relayed the same story, noting that they had been discussing with the ALP students the negative perception that other educators and the community had of their school. Students decided that one way they could begin to change those perceptions was to demonstrate more responsible behavior; thus, the decision to require repayment.

The directors' approach to changing behaviors tends to rely on positive reinforcement as well as natural consequences. "We thought about taking things away, like trips and privileges, but we don't want to take educational stuff away." Discipline is seen as a process. The focus is more on positive

reinforcement for desired behavior, rather than multiple penalties. Students have permission to make mistakes. Staff do not expect perfection but an effort towards excellence.

Program Staffing. Staffing for this program includes:

- 1 central office administrative director
- 2 full time co-directors (who are trained social workers)
- 3 part time certified teacher tutors (English, mathematics, science)
- 1 part time school psychologist (one day per week)
- A math tutor (up to 29 hours per week)
- Volunteer tutors from the Teaching Fellows Program at the local university

Program Budget

The annual budget for Mountainview is approximately $98,000. Most of this amount - $80,000 - comes from the state At-Risk/Alternative Schools block grant. The remaining $18,000 comes from Exceptional Children funds and Impact Aid. These sources of funds are valid, as several of the students are identified exceptional children and/or come from the nearby Indian Reservation. The state average daily membership allotment does not follow these students when they begin the school year at the ALP. Although it is difficult to obtain a precise cost per student (since students stay varying lengths of time), the average per pupil cost of the program for the current 19 students (who have attended to date at some point during the 1996-97 school year) is $5,158. This does not include the state ADM that the student would generate. That amount evidently goes into the allotments for the regular high school. (The statewide average expenditure per student is approximately $4,900.) Staff point out that high school graduation is associated with lower imprisonment rates and lower rates of welfare participation; and these systems cost much more per year and continue over multiple years. If most of these students graduate from high school, this program is considered well worth its cost.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Student Outcomes. Definitions of success include more than just personal perceptions. Mountainview is only in its third semester, so long term success remains to be demonstrated. However, preliminary outcomes are encouraging. To date, all but three of the 27 students are still in school somewhere: 16 are still enrolled in the ALP, 4 have returned to the regular high school, 1 transferred to Florida and a regular high school, 2 dropped out and enrolled in the Adult High School at the community college, and 1 is back in middle school. Three students (11%) have dropped out of school. Preliminary results from the Part I Report suggest that a 50 percent dropout rate for students who have attended ALPs may be typical. Also, of the sixteen NC End-of-Course Tests taken in the Fall of 1996 by

program students, all but one were passed. These successes are beginning to influence the public perceptions of the program, particularly those of other educators.

Educator and the Community Perceptions. Everyone directly associated with the program - both inside and outside the school - considers it is a success, particularly when compared with the failed earlier attempt at creating an alternative school. The program is perceived as effective by both principal and assistant principal at the regular high school. Both report that since Mountainview's inception, the rates of repeated discipline problems have declined. However, many regular high school teachers and community members tend to see the program as "giving nice things to bad kids." This tension stems in part from the field trips and the flexibility given students. The program director pointed out the political battles in keeping a program like this one. The superintendent echoed this sentiment: "The fact that the program is so different is a problem that we have to overcome weekly. Everybody has to be behind it for it to work." The high school principal tends to dismiss critical comments as "griping." He asks teachers, "What did you do for these students before they were in the program?" He is also trying to find ways to incorporate some similar experiences into the high school program. He did note that as students passed the EOC tests and as these students who returned were successful in the regular high school, that attitudes of many teachers were slowly beginning to change.

Policy Maker Perceptions. Members of the school board and the Superintendent like what they see happening with the students. The program is effective for students in ways that the more traditional school is not. One school board member said, "I like the response from the kids. I've seen do-nothing kids become highly productive. I've seen unhappy kids become happy. I spent four days at the program. They have a caring environment. They made sure that everybody was learning. There was a group feeling. I wish we could do this in every class." Another board member pointed out, "The children have a say in how they learn. They're made a part of the system, even though they want to buck the system." People at this level of administration point out the advantage of a program like this one in terms of future savings on welfare or imprisonment costs. The hope is that by providing alternatives in these students' lives they will make productive and self-protective choices.

Parent Perceptions. The parents were very positive about the program and are grateful for any positive changes, particularly those that interrupt cycles of self-destructive behavior. One parent expressed some ambivalence for the different instructional approach, although he was pleased with his child's progress: "He'll communicate with teachers....he's making the best grades he's ever made...I'm old-fashioned....But those old traditional things don't get it with the kids." An adult relative of one student who had returned to regular high school said: "He's on the honor roll and playing football. He's planning to go to college." (Note: This child decided to return to the ALP this semester even though he was successful in the regular program, because he likes it better.) The child of

another mother had stopped taking Ritalin, refused to follow parental rules, began to flunk, and moved out of the house. "Education is very important to us.... For six to eight months, we were pretty dysfunctional. This program came along; and we've got our old (child) back. I know full well that he'd not be in school if it weren't for this program. We're a family again."

Student Perceptions. Finally, the students in the program remain positive about their experiences. Many say that they will not return to the home school, and plan to graduate from the program. They perceive the caring environment to be the program's greatest assets. One student said, "You get shown care, rather than care having to come from us...we're a family." One student who returned to the regular school noted that she had sixteen fights her freshman year. After spending one semester at Mountainview, she has had no fights as a junior. She said, "A class was easier at Mountainview School. They explained if you don't understand. Here, they just yell at you. They aren't willing to help. At Mountainview a lot of kids are messed up and teachers don't let you fall down. They are there to help all the time...I respected them more."

Resources and Improvements Needed

Mountainview is not unlike other new, innovative public institutions scrambling to make ends meet. Their struggles, common to most schools, often translate financially. Be it a desire to offer a broader variety of courses, better transportation on field trips, or meeting basic daily academic needs (e.g. copy machines, new books, etc.), the overall vision of the team involved in the program is to create a well-rounded institution that can fully meet the needs of the children within their community.

Lessons to be Learned

(1) Commitment must come from the top. The support of the superintendent and the school board has been essential in maintaining the school in the face of intense criticism from high school teachers and some of the public. This kind of support must be strong and consistent if a program like this is going to see long term success.

(2) Something different must be done. Different instructional and behavioral strategies must be implemented in alternative programs, as the traditional approaches have not worked for these students. In fact, alternative programs speak to implicit flaws in the regular school system for many students. The abundance of potential students for these programs reflect that something is not working for many students. Especially in these programs, doing the "same old thing" cannot be justified when it is clearly not meeting the needs of many students.

(3) Students come with multiple problems. These students typically have deep personal and emotional problems. They often do not have the family supports available to other students. The program has to be a "family," as well as a school. The emotional/behavioral needs of the students must be addressed for learning to be successful. Sometimes these needs take precedent over instruction, especially at the beginning.

(4) Programs must be structured and flexible. These programs must remain both structured and flexible, always taking into account the fact that these students come with many problems. The programs must have structure (e.g., rules of conduct, learning expectations). In this school, entering contracts outline commitments of the student and the school; absences are not tolerated. If these contracts are not honored, the student is ejected from the program. However, the learning process must be flexible. Time may be spent on an emotional crisis rather than force a particular schedule. This balance between individual understanding and clear accountability, between flexibility and structure, is a difficult balance, but is essential if these young people are going to learn to manage their own lives.

(5) Whatever it takes. Finally, those who work with Alternative Programs must make themselves available 24 hours a day. The challenges that these students face do not end after a six- or eight-hour school day. The students come to rely on the staff in personal crises as well as for academic support. Not surprisingly, the toll on the staff is enormous. But they are there because they care and are committed to these students; and the students know they care. Someone whose day must end by 5:00 would not work well for these students.

THE EXTENDED DAY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

At 2:45 pm the school bell rings. The students gathered outside grab their belongings and prepare themselves for the beginning of the rest of their day. But instead of signaling the end of a structured school day and the beginning of free time and leisure, the bell signifies the beginning of a school day that will not end until late in the evening. An elderly security guard, clad in brown uniform, greets students and ensures that entry into the classroom is smooth and without disruption. The deputy sheriff from the county walks into the office carrying the daily newspaper and a cup of hot coffee. The guidance counselor begins a counseling session with a student who needs someone to talk to about problems. The school principal wanders around the school grounds, looking for any students not moving quickly to class.

Background

The Extended Day School is an alternative school for students who were having difficulty in the regular school setting. It is intended as a transitional program to help students rectify problems, academic and behavioral, so that they may return to their original home school. However, students are not **required** to return to their home schools. They do have the option of staying at the Extended Day School to complete graduation requirements. The school's afternoon/evening schedule and its small class size provide a more flexible, personalized alternative to the regular school option for students who usually have many obstacles with which to contend in order to stay on track for high school promotion and graduation.

Students must apply for the program and explain the reasons why they want to attend. The director then makes the decision to admit the student based on the reason for enrollment and the resources available (e.g., the program does not have the resources to accept exceptional students).

Turning Around A Poor Track Record. The Extended Day School is working towards overcoming a less than distinguished history. The school was floundering badly until the middle of last year when it was either going to be improved or closed. Until that time the school had seen a quick turnover of administrators, making it difficult to establish any consistent vision and program implementation. The superintendent, who had helped start the alternative school some years ago, was committed to the school's success and brought in a retired administrator whom he uses occasionally to help with short term solutions. That person reportedly shaped things up considerably and was replaced last summer with the current principal, who seems both firm and understanding. He has a guidance background, long years of experience, and close ties to the Superintendent. He is trying to add structure to the program. There are files providing helpful information about students and there is order. He is trying to get the curriculum specialists to come to this school on Fridays to keep his teachers in the loop with regard to curriculum changes in the district as well as communicating other important information and serving as resources to answer questions.

Physical Location of School. The physical location of this alternative school is important. It is very isolated. It shares the campus with a vocational day program, but there is little overlap with schedules or instruction. The classroom building resembles a motel in that all the rooms empty to the outside. Students can leave the classroom and just walk away. If the classroom entrances opened inside, then security could be improved by simply monitoring the exits. This physical arrangement makes it easy for students to leave, to hide and smoke (marijuana is popular for some students), or to hang around and come in late for the other classes. Most of the hours of operation for the school are after dark, and the campus is not well-lit; so students are moving from class to class in the dark.

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Age of School Building. It is estimated that the building in which the Extended Day School is housed is about 60 years old. It was a high school for African American students in the 1930s, then a K-3 elementary, then a Vocational Center, before becoming an extended day school. The Extended Day School was started part-time in 1974. It became a full-time Extended Day School in the 1994-95 school year. The building is not in good condition.

School Mission

The Extended Day School's mission is to serve as a more flexible, personalized transitional educational setting for students having difficulty in the regular school setting in order to keep them on track for promotion and high school graduation. In addition to smaller class size and a flexible schedule, the principal says that "throwing a student out of school" is not a consequence he uses very often, even if that same behavior would likely get the student suspended from a regular school. He does not ignore rules violations and there are consequences for these violations, but the unwavering message is that staying in school and graduating are of utmost importance.

Types of Students Served

The school operates and functions by the philosophy that their duty is to meet the needs of each individual student. Racially, the school is approximately 45 percent African-American, 45 percent Native-American, and 10 percent Caucasian. The student population consists primarily of either poor, pregnant, court-ordered probation students, or students who hold jobs during the day who wish to continue with school during the evening hours. There is also a small population of "special" students who are graduating seniors at the regular day schools. They attend the program in order to complete needed credits and graduate on time with their class.

Program

Student Enrollment and Class Size. According to one staff member, class size is usually noticeably higher in the alternative school early in the school year when staff have an active outreach to get students enrolled. After that, class size decreases except for certain peak times during the year. One practical reason for the active outreach program to enroll students at the beginning of the school year is to draw down state funds used for teacher allotments, which are set at the beginning of the school year. Since, unlike a regular school, student enrollment in an alternative school can vary widely from month to month, it is desirable to have the maximum number of teachers allotted from the outset, since that number does not change during the year regardless of student enrollment. This

strategy works to better maintain smaller classes in order to accommodate diverse student needs during peak periods of enrollment.

The Extended Day School was designed to accommodate a maximum student enrollment of 150 students at any given time. At the end of the 1995-96 school year, there were 127 students enrolled. Since students come and go during the school year, the total number of students served during an entire school year would be higher than either of those figures.

Enrollment and attendance fluctuate on almost a daily basis. At the time of this visit, the program enrolled approximately fifty students, half of the original enrollment at the beginning of the school year. According to the director, the primary reasons many students attend the Extended Day School are because of sporadic attendance and behavioral problems in the regular home school. Students are often expelled from the home school after missing six or more days, a county rule that is often adhered to stringently. At the Extended Day School, there is more flexibility with the attendance rule. Students are still expected to attend classes and complete assignments, but the program is more self-paced and does exclude students who miss more than six days. For most students, attending the Extended Day School is their last chance before dropping out of school. As the principal put it:

> *I think that the concept of the program is great. Regular high schools don't meet the needs of all students. If you can save one kid, the price is well spent. When you think about the cost of incarcerating and feeding them for twenty years in prison, the price is clear. Were it not for programs like this, many of the kids would not graduate....they'd just be out on the street.*

A More Personalized Approach to Schooling. Because the goal of the program is to serve as a transitional link back to the regular high school, the teachers and staff do everything possible to keep the students enrolled in school. To aid in reaching this goal, the school adopted a buddy program where each staff member is assigned six students with whom they keep close contact. This program has instilled a sense of accountability and ownership for the school and students, as every staff member including teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, the security guard, and the administrative staff is involved and responsible for the students. Small class size differentiates the academic experience from traditional public schools. Part of the staff's responsibility involves writing weekly progress reports for their students and making referrals as necessary, talking to students about any problems they may be facing, and making phone calls home to students who are missing classes.

Academics and Discipline Are Main Focus. Academics and discipline are the core of the Extended Day School. Offering mostly an academic curriculum, students spend the day and evening in social studies/US history, English, and business education classes that follow the NC Standard Course of Study. In the spring semester of 1997, the Extended Day School was able to gain access to 3 areas of the Career Center for its students: plumbing, brick masonry, and electronics. Students attend classes

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Monday through Thursday. Friday is spent by students working individually with teachers to make up any work from classes missed that week. Friday is also the day for teacher staff development and planning. The principal hopes to hire another teacher next year, so that math and science can be added to their curriculum offerings. Another anticipated improvement for next year is the addition of an elective technical course. Similar to a regular high schools, student progress toward course credit is determined based on test results, classwork, and the completion of other assigned activities.

Of equal importance to academics is discipline and conflict resolution. The primary method of discipline for breaking school rules and for misconduct is in-school suspension (ISS). The principal investigates the problem and decides what disciplinary action needs to be taken. Most problems and conflicts between students are solved through ISS and a counseling session to discuss the problem and identify more appropriate solutions.

There is a school resource officer on duty two nights a week, and the deputy sheriff is on duty the other two nights. Incidence of violence are rare. The school resource officer remarked that there are probably less discipline problems and fights among students in the Extended Day School than in a regular high school. The deputy sheriff has had to make few arrests, but his presence as an authority figure is seen as integral to the lack of problems the program has seen this year. The biggest discipline problem, and the reason most students are sent to ISS, is smoking on school grounds.

No Such Thing As A Typical Day. The Extended Day School follows a schedule different from the average high school. The daily schedule is from 2:45 pm - 9:30 pm. Teachers and students alike agree that there is no such thing as a typical day in this school. Students participate in a strictly academic curriculum on a modified block schedule of 90 minute classes, with a thirty minute dinner break during mid-evening. The school has access to a cafeteria that is part of the adjacent Career Center. A retired cafeteria manager runs the cafeteria. Most of the students are part of the Free and Reduced Lunch Program because of their inability to pay.

Although the school schedule and courses offered in the program are similar to the structure of a typical adult night school, the classroom climate is unpredictable and changes daily. One teacher remarked,

> *There is no such thing as a typical day. It depends upon the group of students you have in a day. Yesterday my class was extremely quiet because I was missing two students. The varied attendance often determines how the class will go.*

Sporadic attendance and the unpredictable temperament of the students often determine the classroom climate. Teachers describe the capacity to understand student mood swings and to allow students to have a few moments to themselves if necessary as important to learning in their classes. One teacher said,

Many of our students, I'd say about 80-90% are attention deficit disordered (ADD). Most of them also have problems and issues that they are struggling with at home. Sometimes you have to let students have space for 10-15 minutes to let them regain themselves.

Program Flexibility is Key to Success. Most of the teachers believe that what makes the program work is the flexibility that an alternative environment can offer the students. Small class sizes of usually ten or fewer students allows more time for individualized, one-on-one instruction, in addition to cooperative learning and group work. Because classes usually consist of students of differing grade levels and backgrounds, teacher flexibility is seen as crucial to the success of the program and to each student. The program director remarked,

You may have a student in the class because of pregnancy, another because of court order, and another in the class because of a need to hold a day job, all in the same class. A teacher who is flexible and has a feel for the background that the kids are coming from works best. The traditional teacher who falls into the regime that "when you are in my class, you are to sing my song and dance to my music" does not fare well here. Our teachers are very flexible and understanding, and the students respect them for that.

Many of the students attribute their learning and success in the program to the small class size and the adaptability of the teachers. One student who will be graduating from the program this year on the honor roll said,

I learn more here because the classes are smaller and I get more attention from the teachers. The teachers aren't as hateful as the ones at the day school. They take time out for you and give you encouragement. They are nicer and explain things better to give you a better understanding.

Although teaching these students is challenging, the building is old and dilapidated, the textbooks are out-dated, and the teachers often have to furnish materials out of pocket for the students, the teachers all agree that the benefit of helping students and seeing them progress and graduate from their home school is the gratification that keeps them teaching.

It is gratifying to give people hope....with this being their last chance with them coming from a system telling them they won't do anything. Giving them hope is the biggest benefit of teaching here.

Staffing. Staffing for this program includes the following:

- 1 principal
- 6 teachers (4 full time, 2 part time)
- 1 guidance counselor
- 5 teacher assistants
- 2 security officer positions (1 School Resource Officer, 1 Deputy Sheriff)

- 1 part time nurse (1 night per week)
- 1 part time staff person from Palmer Drug Education Center (1 night per week)

School Budget

The total budget for the Extended Day School is approximately $750,000 annually. Approximately 84 percent of the total budget comes from state funding, with the remaining 16 percent from local funding. Of the state funds, about 4 percent is from the At-Risk Student allotment and 6 to 7 percent is from the Low Wealth allotment. The remainder is ADM funding for teacher allotments.

Evidence of Success

Perspectives on the effectiveness of the program are perhaps as diverse as the student population the program serves. Teachers and students agree that the students who attend voluntarily are those who reap the benefits of the program and find it effective.

Student Outcomes. Student achievement scores on NC End-of-Course tests are aggregated with the students' home schools. Therefore, there is no summary of trends in student achievement for the Extended Day School. The principal reports that at the end of the current school year, the Extended Day School will report a summary of test results for all students who take the NC End-of-Course Tests while enrolled there.

Student Perceptions. One student who was ordered by the courts to attend the program said:

> *The program hasn't helped me at all. I'm not going to come back....tonight will be my last night. I've been in the ninth grade for three years now. I don't think there is anything they can do here to help me. The only thing this program has done for me is help me wise up.*

Other students find the program beneficial and feel that it has helped them to succeed academically. One student said that when he first arrived at the program, he wasn't passing any classes. Now he is passing and expects to graduate next year. Another student remarked,

> *My grades are much better here than in day school. I think that if I didn't go here I would have dropped out of high school. I know I will go to college now because I am graduating with all A's this year. I want to be a computer operator.*

Clearly, all students are not successful; but many students do succeed who otherwise would not complete school.

Staff Perceptions. Seeing students achieve academically and socially and excelling above and beyond expectations makes the staff of the Extended Day School feel that the program is effective and a success. The school is filled with numerous success stories ranging from a juvenile on probation getting straight A's and graduating, to the teenage mother with a full time job and two children academically succeeding and influencing other students to get their diploma. The School Resource Officer, who has seen all of these "success stories," said:

> *It is my belief that this is one of the best programs out there. Probably 99% of the students here would be complete drop-outs if it weren't for this program. If I had to, I'd volunteer to work here. I try to be more than just the law. I try to be a father figure and treat them the same way I treat my kids. Sometimes it just boils down to the fact that the kids just need someone to talk to and love them. If I can make a difference in one kid's life, it makes me happy. It brightens my heart to see kids ready to go back to their regular schools to graduate. I think without this program, many of the kids would be lost—it is a savior.*

For the principal, talking to students who say the program is worthwhile, seeing more students pass the competency tests and graduate each year is proof enough that the program is working and that it is effective.

Needed Resources and Improvements

Expanded Curriculum. An increase in the variety of course offerings to include art, math and science; the addition of a media center or learning lab; and a move to more individualized self-paced units are all intended future improvements if funds are available. The move to more self-paced individualized work is a definite change that the program is planning for the next year. The teaching staff and the principal believe this improvement will aid in the ongoing assessment of student progress, given the unpredictable attendance and the varied academic levels of students.

Effective Staff Development. Adequate funding is one of the biggest barriers that this program faces. The school lacks the resources to have effective staff development and training. Although the teachers have been doing good work in the program, most are not trained to work with students with learning problems, behavior problems, and special needs.

Up-to-Date Textbooks and Appropriate Teaching Materials/Activities. Also lacking are up-to-date textbooks and materials for hands-on projects in the classroom. Teachers and the guidance counselor remarked that they would like to acquire audio-visual resources to aid in student learning. Because most of the students are visual learners, they see this as essential to student classroom learning. The students and staff also believe that money for things like field-trips and school activities would help boost enthusiasm and learning and enhance the social aspects of the school

setting. As requested by most of the students, the principal is currently working with the superintendent of the school district to add a basketball court to the school grounds.

Physical Condition of School Building. Improving the physical condition of the school building has already begun. The principal made it a priority to clean out dust and dirt from the building in order to create an environment more conducive to learning. Teachers would like to see more work done on beautification projects so that the students can learn in an environment and building that they can be proud of. This is no small task as the building now feels impersonal. Although the new principal has made it a number one priority to clean up the building, it is still described as "a dump."

Community Perception. But perhaps the most disconcerting barrier that the program faces and continues to struggle with is the community's perception of the program and the students. The program guidance counselor said that the students in the Extended Day School are stigmatized and the program is seen as a "dumping ground" for the problem students who have been brushed aside. The program director added,

> *When I came on board, I wanted to change the image of the program. The community has this image that the kids are walking around with machetes and Colt 45s, and that simply is not the case. We are trying to rid ourselves of the image of being the "red-headed step-child."*

Communication and Linkage with Regular Schools. Part of the reason for this negative image and stereotype of the students in the Extended Day School is attributable, according to the guidance counselor, to the lack of communication between the regular home schools and the program. The regular schools have virtually no knowledge of the workings of the Extended Day School, nor do they make any efforts to find out about the program. Creating a link between the schools may rectify some of the image problems and stereotypes.

Strengthening the ties and communication between the home school and the Extended Day School will also allow for a smoother transition for students who wish to return to the home school. Many of the students, however, prefer the Extended Day School and choose to continue in the program until graduation instead of transitioning back to the home school. For educators interested in starting an alternative program, teachers advise having a positive attitude about young people and believing in the notion that all students can learn. Being flexible and never giving up are key.

Lessons Learned

(1) Some students prefer to remain in the ALP and not return to the home school. They experience more success in the small school setting, receive more personalized instruction

and attention in smaller classes, and generally do better all around with the flexibility afforded in these programs.

(2) The physical plant of the alternative school can create associated problems with safety, image, and important messages about not being valued. Some alternative schools are located in less than desirable places, sometimes with questionable safety issues regarding the physical plant (e.g., areas not well lit; classrooms with unmonitored, direct exits to the outside). Students receive messages, intended or unintended, from the physical condition of the place they call school about how much they are valued, how safe they are, and how important their continued schooling is. Likewise, the community receives these same impressions. Even if buildings are old, efforts to clean and "beautify" a campus can communicate that the school is an important place of learning.

(3) More effective budgeting methods are needed. School budgets and teacher allotments are determined at the beginning of the school year, when enrollment in ALPs is typically at its lowest point. It is usually at nine week or semester grading periods that student enrollment increases because of identified academic difficulty. Likewise, other peak periods occur during the year because of behavioral difficulties (usually truancy, disruptive or violent behavior, or drug/alcohol related problems). The inconsistencies in resource allocation versus patterns of student enrollment create budget gaps for the ALP and have direct impact on their success in the important area of student outcomes.

(4) The presence of law enforcement officers on campus aid in reduction of discipline problems. These personnel act both as "enforcers" and as staff resources available for students. School Resource Officers (SRO) and other law enforcement officials often act in a counseling capacity, educate students about the law, and help them see hurtful consequences of their behavior. As one SRO stated, "I try to be more than just the law. I try to be a father figure and treat them the same way I treat my kids. Sometimes it just boils down to the fact that the kids just need someone to talk to and love them."

(5) ALPs need competent teachers and an array of support staff in order to effectively educate at-risk students. Teachers in alternative schools need to be competent in the content area they teach. They also need to be flexible, caring, and competent in managing behavior and resolving conflict. Further, most students need support beyond the classroom setting to resolve personal or home related problems. Relevant support staff include such areas as guidance counselors, nurses, social workers, security officers, psychologists, and substance abuse intervention specialists.

(6) ALPs need accountability and systems to measure continuous progress for students that go beyond the state accountability system. Because of the continuous flow of students into and out of alternative learning programs over the course of the year, ALPs need assessment

systems that, upon enrollment, provide diagnostic information about student achievement levels and needs. When students exit the program, the same diagnostic assessment system should provide information about academic gains and current academic status. This information should follow the student back to the home school to aid in successful transitions into the academic program there. While the state accountability assessments (NC End-of-Course tests) are helpful, they are only administered at the end of the school year and are not designed to be diagnostic. Students who are chronically absent may not be assessed. ALPs need more than one assessment and they need to be able to track the progress of students at varying levels of achievement over differing lengths of stay in the program.

VALLEY ELEMENTARY SUPPORT SERVICES PROGRAM

It should be said at the outset that the Valley Elementary Support Services Program does not meet the definition of an Alternative Learning Program (i.e., a separate program providing core academic instruction) that was established to identify programs for the ALP Evaluation. The primary reason is because the children involved remain in the regular school program rather than moving to a separate one. However, a brief review of this program is useful because it broadens the spectrum of approaches for working with (and supporting) at-risk students, particularly at the elementary grades. The small number of students at grades 3, 4, and 5 included in the ALP Evaluation programs suggest that separate programs are the exception for young children. Thus, Valley Elementary probably represents a more typical and effective way to serve young students.

Coordinated Team Approach to Service Delivery. Valley Elementary provides wide ranging, multiple support services to help children in grades K - 8 remain successful in a regular school. Using the umbrella image, all services are provided by a Student Support Team rather than several individuals working separately. This team consists of the principal, school nurse, guidance counselor and a social worker. The team meets formally once a week and informally on a daily basis. Referrals to outside agencies are coordinated through this team. Increased efficiency and decreased duplication in meeting the needs of the child and family is the aim in this approach. Teachers are pulled in as needed and help shape the plans for the child.

Wide Range of Services. The program provides a wide range of services, from academic to social to medical. All students are referred through this team, whether the need is for anticipated assessment for Exceptional Children's programs, social service needs, hygiene needs, anger control or other areas. Program activities are developed to prevent problems and/or to intervene early for students (e.g., a study skills weekend; referral to Boy Scouts), as well as to intervene in existing problems (e.g., behavior modification plans in the classroom). The "Success Center" is a before-school tutorial for students needing academic assistance, and is staffed by teacher assistants and volunteers

working from teacher-prepared plans. More tutoring was being planned by the PTA for students who were on the failure list. Support Services provide tutors, facilitate parenting education/skills classes or provide academic enrichment for the kids. The immediate medical and dental needs are also addressed. Literally dozens of services and activities are provided by the school through this system of care. The approach is intended to intervene and support these students and their families before a crisis occurs, so that the children can and will remain in the normal academic setting.

School is Site for Service Delivery. Successful interagency work that uses the school as a central site simplifies often fragmented approaches to working with at-risk children while providing continuity and support for the family. More students needs are met and the approaches are often tailored to the specifics at hand. A documentation process has begun and individual files are being kept so that the needs of children and families will be met with little repetition of approach. Further, communication - the key to dealing with children and families - is facilitated when the support is integrated.

Advantages of This Approach. Team members cite several key advantages of this approach over previously used intervention by individual specialists based on separate referrals. (1) More students are being reached due to the ability to group students by types of needs and services. At the time of the visit (slightly over half-way through the year), 146 students were identified as at risk in some way. The social worker noted that she served 15 students last year, but had been involved in over 100 staffings by this point in the current school year. (2) As the team sees common needs across students, additional programs or services are being created to fill gaps or meet needs. For example, conflict resolution training was provided for all sixth-graders. The "Kid City Club" was designed for students who needed social skills information. (3) Coordination is improved, because staff know and understand more about what each is doing. Without the team, it was difficult to communicate about what each person was doing. Someone might do a home visit, unaware of information passed on by the parent to another person. Now, services complement each other and everyone is more informed and effective.

Create Long Term, Prevention-Oriented Solutions. Finally, this program creates and implements strategies to reduce the long term effects of poverty, family instability, medical inconsistency, and lack of academic support will have on young children. Instead of waiting until a serious problem is manifested (and seems insurmountable) with an older child, the goal is to identify needs early such that coping skills and agency support is in place to soften what, for many children, is a bumpy ride. It is beneficial to consider alternative programs not just as crisis interventions for older students, but as an approach to address early emerging academic, behavioral, medical, and/or social needs that impact the child's learning and life at school as well as other areas of his/her life.

CROSS-SITE SYNTHESIS

The four case studies included in this evaluation were chosen to represent as much program diversity as possible. They reflect several possible approaches documented in the larger statewide study. This maximum variation strategy of site selection is typically used to facilitate understanding of both the range and unity of some set of social phenomena. Although there are obvious differences among the programs, there are also striking similarities across the four very different types of ALPs. These programs, situated in different regions across the state, make varied choices about what approaches are most effective for their at-risk students. These programmatic and philosophical differences are observable to the case study researcher. Yet in spite of any particular variations, all four sites are staffed by people who are committed not only to the concept of alternative learning programs, but to the success of each individual student as well. All four programs face the challenge of teaching students whose academic success is or has been compromised. Thus all four ALPs share a common commitment to helping these students see some sort of academic success, either within the alternative school itself or back in the traditional public school. Variations lie in purpose, philosophy, methodology, specific population needs, resources and the actual student demographics. Taken together, these case studies can offer some lessons about the alternative learning programs, both for those who would like to organize them and for policy makers who wish to improve their effectiveness.

Brief Program Overviews

The Brookstone School, a transitional program, serves middle school students who have had severe behavior problems in their regular home school setting. Students are at Brookstone because they have been ordered there. This program is often seen as the "last chance" before the school system offers no recourse but to expel a student for the remainder of the year. The focus of the program for each student is on some significant behavior modifications as a pre-requisite for returning to a regular classroom. A highly structured academic environment, infractions are not tolerated and the curricula remains relatively standard. Small classes are the norm at Brookstone in order to ensure the necessary individual attention to meet both the academic and emotional needs of the students.

The Mountainview program sees itself as simultaneously academic and therapeutic. These high school students must go through an application process before they are accepted into the program. It is a day program, committed to individually-paced, experiential work that can be highly flexible in structure. It also has a strong counseling component to support students' emotional/behavioral problems and staying in school.

Approximately half of the high school students in the Extended Day School are there by court order and the other half are there by choice. This program, as well, aims to have students return to their home school and ultimately graduate with a diploma. The academic programs are individualized and flexible, to optimize chances of keeping students in school, rather than rigid and impersonal, with rules and structure that push students out. While it strives to offer a standard curricula and develop better social skills, it is the small classes that both students and staff see as essential.

Although not typical of the previous three schools, the elementary program at Valley Elementary is an "integrated services approach." Its goal is to intervene with younger children in hopes of preventing future more difficult problems. Students typically are not pulled out into separate academic programs. Rather, coordinated services are designed to provide quicker, more effective, and less duplicative services.

Although the nuts and bolts are different, all four programs meet students' sufferings head on. There is little or no denial regarding what has brought them to this point. The determination to see each student on a case-by-case basis means that the staff avoid generalizations as ways of characterizing what students do and how or why they do it. It allows them to remain caring to the groups they serve.

Common Findings Across Programs

The findings and recommendations contained in this part of the report deal only with the three programs at the middle and high school levels that met the standard definition of an ALP for evaluation purposes.

Effectiveness is determined primarily by individual success. All three academic programs assess effectiveness primarily on an individual basis. Teachers, administrators, and counselors readily recite anecdotes about students who have benefited from their particular program, often emphasizing the inadequacy of regular schools for meeting the needs of these students. All the alternative programs studied share a sense of success if students increase a commitment to their own academic and personal success. For the Extended Day School, giving students the opportunity to earn extra credits is a strategy to help students there view a high school diploma as a manageable goal. Mountainview looks for consistent attendance and completion of academic requirements (either there or in the student's regular home school) as the barometer of individual progress. Similarly, they want the students to demonstrate improvement in social skills and group interaction. The Brookstone School's daily behavioral assessment process reinforces a constant self-checking system which the

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students can then (hopefully) apply in a more socially challenging environment different from the Brookstone School.

None of the programs visited had systematic evaluation procedures in place. Even tracking students who leave the program appears to be difficult or even non-existent. Part of this is due to another common observation across programs - the home schools do not "own" or feel any sense of responsibility for these students once they enroll in an ALP, even when the goal is for the student to return to the home school. In addition, "accomplishing" the sorts of goals held by these programs remains an amorphous process; there is no formula or set of procedures that works in all settings with any type of student need. In some sense, it is true that an alternative program's ability to keep students in school at all is evidence of improvement over the regular home schools, where suspension, expulsion, or dropping out seemed the inevitable outcome. Yet the ALPs lack a more systematic assessment of effectiveness, both for themselves and as a way of improving the perceptions the outside educational community has of them.

Regular schools are aversive setting for many students. There is consensus, across all the faculties, that many of their students' problems are intensified by their experiences in their regular home schools. Once students enter these ALPs, many of the discipline and behavioral problems are less evident. Students often concur and find that the alternative program is more effective than the regular school. "Caring" is a word often used by students to describe the alternative programs and their teachers. They did not ascribe "caring" as an attribute of teachers in their home schools. In fact, several students cited comments by teachers/assistant principals that communicated their desire to see the students out of school (e.g., "Why don't you leave school and quit wasting taxpayers money?") While this extreme may not be typical, most of these students feel alienated from the regular school. This was especially true for the high school programs. More so at high school than the middle school program, students frequently did not want to return to the regular school. They felt targeted and that teachers really did not care about them.

ALPs are viewed as dumping grounds. There is consensus among the faculties and students interviewed that the wider educational community views ALPs as "dumping grounds" or "junior jails" for young people who will not make it over time. All three middle and high school programs noted the negative comments made about the school and the students. Few regular educators bothered to learn about the alternative programs. Even the inadequate physical facilities and the fundamental lack of instructional materials and equipment communicate to both students and staff that the public perception is valid. The programs almost always take the left-over, old facilities or are crammed into tiny spaces. Some - but not all - do not draw down the ADM allotments for students in the program at the beginning of the year. Essentially, these young people learn that society has very

little hope for them (Kozol, 1991). The students at one program have decided to become proactive and have explicitly started thinking of ways to change these perceptions.

Facilities, materials, and budgets are inadequate. As noted above, these programs are frequently assigned the "left-over" facilities. Often they must scrounge for funds to buy updated equipment, materials, and supplies. The three primary ALPs evaluated here fund their programs in different ways, but in each case they were seeking more funding to carry out their goals and activities. For many programs the ADM generated by these students at their home schools do not follow them to the ALP. This happens because students enter the ALP during the year after allotments are assigned and cannot be transferred. In other cases, the local school district may have decided on funding methods other than teacher allotments based on ADM for students in the program at the beginning of the year. It is more likely in an ALP than in a regular school that some students may not stay for an entire year. However, a question is raised when regular schools are not successful with these students and receive per pupil expenditures of $4800 or more, while ALPs are expected to turn these students around often receiving half that amount.

Different enrollment trends necessitate flexibility in shifting resources. Student enrollment in regular schools typically peaks in the second month of school and then declines over the remainder of the school year, in effect, reducing class size. State funding for teacher allotments are provided to school districts based on average daily membership (ADM) for the higher of the first two months of school. The local district administration decides how the actual allotment of teachers is distributed among its schools.

Student enrollment typically works in the reverse for ALPs. Enrollment is at a low point at the beginning of the school year, with peaks at the end of first semester and then again in March and April through the end of the year. Student enrollment during peak periods often exceeds the capacity for which the ALPs were designed. The end result is that class size goes up, and these programs are more likely to lose their effectiveness. Instead, they often become "holding tanks" for students–hence the term "dumping ground."

ALPs meeting the official state designation as a "school" draw down the state ADM funds generated by students enrolled during the first two months of school. There are also some ALPs operating separately as "schools" that are not officially designated as schools by the state. State allotments for students in these "schools" usually stays at the students' home schools at the discretion of the school district. This means these "schools" do not have regularly allocated funds they can count on to support programs. Even for the ALPs that are officially designated as schools and receive ADM funding, these different enrollment patterns in relation to the state ADM funding cycle (first two months of school) create resource gaps for ALPs.

Regular Schools do not "own" these students. Regular schools do not maintain connections with students or a sense of responsibility for them once they enroll in alternative programs. In all three ALPs at the middle and high school levels, lack of ownership for these students at their home schools was cited as a problem by ALP staff. This perception may explain why so many ALP students felt alienated from their home schools. Of course, there are always some people who really do care about these students, such as the regular high school principal in the school district where Mountainview is located. But the sense of ALP staff and students was that most staff at the home schools just wanted them out. This issue continues to be exacerbated when students leave the ALP and return to the home school. There are few systematic strategies to follow the student to determine if they are successfully "re-integrating" into the home school. Transition plans or special attention to returning students were not evident in the programs visited. Transition plans are an important factor in a maintaining a student's improved behavior. They should be customized to support the individual student during the critical phase of re-entry to the home school.

ALP staff combine caring with high expectations. Most ALP staff are there because they want to be. The staff of programs visited were obviously committed to the students in these programs. But they held high expectations for students and worked hard to see that their expectations were met. As two programs explicitly noted, they combine "love and standards." Because they care, the toll on staff can be heavy. At Mountainview, which is both therapeutic and academic, staff are "on call" 24 hours a day. The success - or failure - of even a single student is taken to heart. Support for these staff is often lacking, both in terms of training and occasional relief. Emotional burnout is a very real possibility.

Many staff have little formal training and ongoing support to work with ALP students. The dedication of these teachers is impressive, but the intensity of effort required to work effectively with inadequate curriculum, instructional materials and equipment - along with some of the most challenging students - makes teaching extremely taxing. Very few of the teachers have formal training to work with students who have so many academic, behavioral, and social needs. Yet they negotiate these hurdles with both dignity and dedication. Thus their own assessment of a need for more training and guidance is significant.

Needed Improvements/Recommendations

Alternative learning programs have a host of needs if they are to continue improving and meeting the needs of an ever-expanding population. Many of the needed improvements have implications financially and will not be easily resolved. Nevertheless, identifying the needs helps to focus attention on finding solution strategies.

Hire Competent, Caring Staff. Obviously, no school or program tries to hire inadequate staff. However, type of staff employed in ALPs is critical to the success of students. The most important quality is having the capacity to care about students who are not always easy to love. Staff must see each student's potential, even among the most difficult to reach. They must understand the balance of structure, high expectations, and flexibility required to keep these students in schools and learning. Students tend to report that staff at the ALPs, as opposed to their home school, care about them. Learning is not likely to occur without that base.

Improve Staff Development and Support. Improved staff support is a recurring theme. Increased professional development is a vital necessity that has not been systematically addressed. Skills to work with different learning styles, to work successfully with emotional and behavioral problems, and to know how to balance structure and flexibility in teaching and learning can be developed only with appropriate training. As the network of ALPs grows throughout the state, that network may be one resource for skill-building and sharing ideas that work. Similarly, staff need occasional periods of respite or other means of support. Knowing that administrators care and support them and the program can go a long way toward maintaining energy and hope.

Find Ways to Improve Funding. Although funded in different ways, funding decisions for both alternative schools and programs are made by the local district and school administration, not the state. The largest proportion of state funding to local districts is based on the average daily membership (ADM) of the district's student population. Most of the ADM funding comes to districts in the form of teacher allotments and instructional supplies and materials. Several issues have bearing on the funding issues and potential solutions.

First, students who enroll in ALPs usually come with multiple, complex, interrelated problems. They are usually behind academically, have complex behavioral/emotional problems, and/or adult-like life circumstances with which to deal (e.g., pregnant/parenting, working, living independently). In order to catch these students up academically and keep them on track for grade level promotions and graduation, resources beyond teachers are often needed at the school. Different instructional and behavioral strategies must be used since more traditional methods clearly have not worked. **ALPs need an established minimum of instructional resources and core staff below which they should not operate.** The core staff should include enough competent, caring teachers to maintain a small class size (below 15), sufficient guidance counselors and other support staff (mental health, health, social work, behavior management specialists), to address the particular needs of the student population, sufficient administrative positions to effectively run the program.

Second, alternative learning programs (ALPs) consist of both alternative *schools* and alternative *programs*. "Programs" may be part of a regular high school or may operate as a separate

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"school." The local district is not obligated to move state allotments to the program. For these reasons, many alternative *programs* do not get their "fair share" of the regular schools' resources although they are taking some of the regular schools' students. That is, alternative programs are in effect reducing class size (and often disruption) in regular classrooms by taking selected at risk students into the alternative program, but the funds from the regular program do not follow the student. Alternative programs are often left to scrounge, beg, and borrow in order to get even minimal resources to operate a program. Again, ALPs need an established minimum of instructional resources and core staff below which they should not operate.

Third, local districts typically fund officially designated alternative schools in a manner similar to that of regular schools. That is, funding for alternative schools is largely based on the highest student enrollment during the first two months of school. The problem with this funding cycle is that it is based on a time period when student enrollment in alternative schools is often at its lowest. Student enrollment for alternative schools fluctuates over the course of the year, with peak periods at the end of first semester and again during second semester. During peak periods, student enrollment often exceeds the capacity of the school, which can negatively impact the program's effectiveness with students. **What is needed is additional resources for alternative schools, especially staff, during peak periods of student enrollment**. The Alternative Schools/At-Risk Student Services consolidated fund is one source of funding to support this need.

The bottom line is, the funding and quality of educational experiences of ALPs must be improved if we are to improve overall achievement for the state since these programs serve so many of the state's at-risk student population.

Improve Facilities, Resources, and Curriculum. The need for improved facilities is well documented in North Carolina schools, and alternative schools share in this need. However, these alternative programs also seem to have more complex issues. Often alternative programs have to compete for technology, materials, and books; and many times these programs lose. This loss is particularly profound given the wide range of skills and grade levels that the programs must address with the students they enroll. The individualized nature of the programs requires a full complement of materials, technology, and other equipment as well as a lot of "consumables" in the form of worksheets, workbooks, and curricula. While all these programs attempt to offer coursework based on the NC Standard Course of study, they frequently lack the instructional materials and facilities to make the coursework fully available to all students. For example, all programs expressed a desire to be able to offer more courses like those taught in the regular school, with at least some of the amenities such as fine arts, physical education, and their own cafeterias. Courses that require labs are often a problem, because the ALPs do not always have lab facilities. One ALP was exploring use of lab facilities at the local university in order to teach science classes. These challenges are more acute for programs

functioning as separate schools, which was typical of these three programs. Perhaps better use of home schools for these classes would result in more collaboration for and sense of ownership of the ALP students.

Create Better Connections to the Home School. Although touched on throughout this report, it cannot be stressed enough that strong working relationships with the broader educational communities is essential for these alternative programs continued success. Clearly the interactions are complex. On the one hand the regular schools are relieved when these students are reassigned to alternative learning programs. Yet they do little independently to maintain a connection with and support their students while in the ALP or to help prepare for a smooth return when they are ready to come back. Both schools must see the students as "theirs." Transition plans must be in place if students are to successfully return to environments where they previously were not successful. District and school administration staff can insist that these steps be taken and should be the ones to initiate development of such plans. The regular school staff should be made aware of the goals, strategies, and instruction taking place at the ALP. In Mountainview, the instructional strategies used have created what appeared to be ill will from regular teachers because other students did not have similar opportunities. In that case the next recommendation may be in order.

Regular Schools Need to Adapt. The logic of alternative programs is that they provide a new educational option for these students who have been struggling so dramatically. But then the students are sent back into, what was for them, a turbulent environment. It may be undesirable to keep all students in alternative programs permanently, but the regular programs need to adapt if these students are to successfully return and maintain a successful status until graduation. For some students, having the option to remain in an alternative school might be the only viable solution to take a student from where he or she is to high school graduation. It is also important for regular school staff to be systematically engaged in developing new practices that would help prevent many of these problems in the first place, so that more students could be successful while remaining in the regular schools. While the students sent to ALPs clearly are among the least successful, conversations with other students over time along with other research indicate that many students are alienated from school and lack a sense of caring from staff. Teaching methods, while slowly beginning to change, revolve around lecture and less engaging forms of instruction. In fact, the ALP where students appeared actively excited about learning was Mountainview, where they used experiential learning, field trips linked to course objectives, and the like.

Establish Systems for Tracking and Evaluating Student Progress. It is clear that all the alternative programs need technical assistance in developing more formal evaluation and assessment processes that would allow both internal and outside documentation of the student populations' successes and failures. These systems do not need to be complex. Even tracking what

happens to students once they return to the home school for a period of years would give some indication of whether the students are even remaining in school and/or graduating, which is the ultimate goal. Other indicators of program progress might include: improvement on state tests over time; increasing percentages of student passing end-of-course tests; tracking the number of suspensions and/or other disciplinary events before, during, and after ALP enrollment to gauge effectiveness of the intervention. Further, ALPs need assistance in developing ways to use data in decision-making, both to improve the programs and to communicate with various constituencies. For example, it appears that the number of EOC tests passed by the Mountainview students and the return of students who are now making passing grades and not disrupting class is beginning to have some impact on changing attitudes of regular high school teachers about the program. Without this kind of evidence or documentation, districts tend to fall back on less reliable means of decision-making, such as personal opinions or politics.

There is No One Best Way. Finally, the beliefs and commitment of the staff, and the resulting relationship-building with students are what makes these programs as effective as they are. None of these schools have recipes for success, and thus caution should be exercised both in assessment and replication of each particular program. Any effort to improve these programs should take care not to undercut any process which is clearly evolving from within the program and its community. Instead, any action should bolster the programs' abilities to develop its own strong belief systems and methods. This requires tolerance, as each of these programs makes different assumptions about the nature of students they serve, and what is best for these students. Clearly, as one superintendent said, "something different must be done for these students." And many ALPs across the state are teaching in more traditional ways. As the adage goes: "If you keep doing the same things, you keep getting the same results." Based on these case studies, a **small class** along with **individualized and experiential teaching format** and a **caring faculty** would appear to be three of the characteristics of programs likely to be effective with these students. It may be possible to tease out a clearer consensus about what is the "best type" of program as programs evolve across the state. However, forcing that issue at this time would risk eliminating opportunities to learn from programs that are trying new ways to reach challenging students.

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